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# **‘What’s Bigger Than a Standing Ovation?’: Intimacy and Spectacle at the Tony Awards**

**Kirsty Sedgman**

## **Abstract:**

In 1963, J. S. Siegels described two opposing methods by which artists could affect their audiences. The first was an aesthetic of *grandeur*: ‘a principle of force, based on the sheer size and power of the impression’. The second was an aesthetic of *intimacy*, ‘a principle of attraction: it demands a closeness of association between subject and audience, and necessitates identification and involvement’ (1963: 248). Almost half a century later there remains a lingering understanding that intimacy and spectacle are irreconcilable. While small performances are increasingly praised for their ability to offer audiences ‘authentically’ intimate encounters with ‘real’ people, ‘largeness’ is often associated with artificiality, insincerity, the manufactured spectacular. By analysing online comments to a YouTube video of ‘Bigger!’ – the celebration of ‘Big Broadway’ performed by Neil Patrick Harris during the 2013 Tony Awards – this article shows how audiences are able to feel a sense of intimacy while watching big performances, even when these are not experienced ‘live’.

## **Keywords:**

Musical theatre, Tony Awards, Tonys, Neil Patrick Harris, NPH, intimacy, spectacle, authenticity, liveness, online fandom, audiences

## **Introduction**

In his opening number for the 67<sup>th</sup> Annual 2013 Tony Awards, Neil Patrick Harris urges us to make the theatrical spectacle *bigger*. Indeed, his own performance is anything but diminutive. The number’s opening sequence uses the consciously minimalist scenography of the musical *Once*: the curtain rises on Harris, a musician in a Dublin pub’s open-night session, strumming a guitar and singing softly about the power of small, quiet art to move us. This is quickly overthrown in favour of an ode to musicals’ potential for largeness, as Harris ditches the guitar and ushers in cast after cast from Broadway’s biggest shows. Performers from *Kinky Boots* do high kicks, while *Bring it On*’s cheerleaders toss each other in the air. *Newsies*’ eponymous newspaper sellers conga down the aisle, and the diminutive casts of *Matilda*, *Christmas Story*, and *Annie* are praised in song for

dancing like pros. And at the centre of it all there is Harris: dancing and singing, leaping through hoops, rapping, performing a magic disappearing act, and gambolling with two hundred dancers (including the ex-boxer Mike Tyson). The strenuousness of the challenge is playfully signalled by his fellow performers' repeated exhortation to go, Neil, go!, emphasising the endurance required to get to the end. By the finale, which sees Harris hanging from a giant Tony statue, the stage is filled with performers from every Broadway show: viewers of the televised ceremony can see the camera panning to take in live spectators' faces, looking around the auditorium open-mouthed, clapping and cheering and working hard to take it all in.

The original idea for the 'Bigger!' number came from Harris himself, planning his fourth consecutive stint hosting the Awards, which that year were due to take place in the 6,015-capacity Radio City Music Hall (RCMH). Average Broadway theatre capacities typically range from around 600 (e.g. Helen Hayes Theatre) to 1,900 (e.g. the Gershwin). The Tony Awards had spent its previous two seasons at the Beacon Theatre, which at 2,800 seats is one of the larger Broadway theatres and yet is less than half the size of RCMH. 'I was in my car driving, and I remember thinking, "Well, if it's moving to Radio City, there's your opening number." You can embrace the largeness of it all' (Harris, in Strecker 2013: np). Produced in collaboration with Lin-Manuel Miranda (lyrics), Tom Kitt (music), and Rob Ashford (choreography), 'Bigger!' is one of the Tonys' most popular performances to date, winning the 2014 Emmy for 'Outstanding Original Music and Lyrics'<sup>1</sup> and gathering millions of YouTube views. The 2013 Tony viewing figures were also higher than average, with Nielsen ratings indicating that the live broadcast had easily exceeded seven million viewers for the first time in four years (Kissel 2013). In keeping with the focus of this special issue, it is the 'largeness' of both the number and its response that this article explores. The twin realms of theatre studies and practice have tended to emphasize the value of 'small' performances. At the zenith of this trend sits the increasingly popular

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<sup>1</sup> In the sixty-six years since the Emmy Awards began, the 'Outstanding Original Music and Lyrics' category has only been awarded to a Tony number on four occasions (1994, 2012, 2013, 2014), of which the three most recent starred Neil Patrick Harris.

style of 'one-to-one', which began to gain ground as a distinct form of performance in the early 2000s (Gomme 2015). Comprising an encounter between one audience member and one performer, to take part in a one-to-one event might involve being captured, blindfolded, bound to a wheelchair and bombarded with sensory stimulation (Ontrorend Goed's *The Smile Off Your Face*), joining in with a sing-along of 'Puff the Magic Dragon' (Emma Benson's *Me You Now*), or being bathed and cradled naked by a perfect stranger (Adrian Howell's *The Pleasure of Being: Washing Feeding Holding*).<sup>2</sup> Its champions frequently praise the form for 'the possibility of connection and personal encounter' it presents (Heddon *et al.* 2012: 120): for its ability to offer 'intimate' encounters with 'real' people. In contrast, 'largeness' is often associated with artificiality, insincerity, the manufactured spectacular. The smaller the experience, the greater the opportunity for genuine audience-performer connection. It is a seemingly simple equation.

This article presents Neil Patrick Harris' remarkable celebration of 'Big Broadway' as a particularly concentrated example of how 'larger' – more complicated, technically difficult, visually impressive – performances are able to generate a sense of closeness to performers: feelings of intimacy that, in theory, this kind of spectacle is unable to produce. Furthermore, it explains how many audiences experienced Harris' performance in some respects as an intimate encounter despite the fact that – as commenting on a YouTube video suggests – the act of watching it did not take place 'live'. It demonstrates the processes by which audiences seek to forge connections – between themselves and performers, and between themselves and their fellow spectators – through posting descriptions of affect and engagement online. In investigating these ideas it hopes to contribute to recent efforts to problematize concepts such as 'authenticity', 'intimacy', and performer-audience 'connection'. Rather than distancing their audiences, this article shows how spectacular productions can provoke feelings of *closeness* to performers, prompted by the feeling that through

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<sup>2</sup> These three examples were all performed during the 2010 'One On One Festival' held at Battersea Arts Centre.

remarkable challenging physical sequences these people are giving out something of themselves.

## **The Tony Awards and ‘Big Broadway’**

While attention has been paid to the economic and prestigious impacts of winning a Tony on triumphant Broadway productions (Simonoff and Ma 2002; White 2014), there has been relatively little scholarly interest in considering the experience of watching the Tony Awards. In fact, the field of theatre studies has seen noticeably few publications that concern themselves with understanding the actual embodied experience of watching musicals in general, or the kinds of motivations, expectations, pleasures and disappointments that musical fans bring to and get out of viewing practices. Empirical studies of musical theatre audiences overwhelmingly tend to come out of an arts marketing tradition, and in the main concern themselves with demographic analyses (see e.g. Broadway League 2016 for a recent comprehensive report). While this work undoubtedly produces useful information, the knowledge gathered by such research is often restricted to who attends, and from where and how often, rather than *why*.

This is not to suggest that ‘straight’ theatre has a long history of empirical investigations. Until relatively recently it has been possible to cite only a handful of studies, with the field of live performance largely beset by the propensity of academics to make unsubstantiated assumptions about audiences (cf. Freshwater 2009; Radbourne, Glow and Johanson 2013; Reason and Sedgman 2015). As Matthew Reason (2015) explains, cultural commentators have historically worked to position participation in certain ‘high’ cultural forms (such as theatre, opera, and ballet) as offering audiences particular kinds of psychological, emotional, or social ‘benefits’. Meanwhile, the claims made on behalf of musical theatre often exhibit a greater level of ambivalence about the value of taking part.<sup>3</sup> The lingering anxiety which fans of spectacular musicals

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<sup>3</sup> My intention here is not to diminish the significance of the many excellent examples of scholarship in which the author outlines where *they* see the value of musicals as residing. I

provoke has been considered by Dan Rebellato, who talks about the polarized responses the form produces, whereby 'scorn [...] on one side tends to inspire equally passionate defences on the other, and vice versa, so that musical audiences wind up getting mocked as much as musicals themselves' (2011: np). For example, in 'Wicked Divas, Musical Theater, and Internet Girl Fans', Stacey Wolf explains how female teenagers participating in *Wicked* fandom were frequently presented by the media as silly, immature 'cultural dupes' who were engaging with the musical incorrectly. Meanwhile, Andrew Lloyd Webber has recently distanced himself very publically from the shared love of invested audiences for his own *Phantom of the Opera*, dismissing it as 'a whole sad culture' (Hoyle 2010). When musical audiences do emerge from the darkness of the auditorium they are often viewed with suspicion, an indistinct and homogenized mass, seen to access the wrong kind of culture or to enjoy it in the wrong way. This is why it is particularly problematic that although over the past few years a number of influential projects have emerged investigating actual audience members' responses to theatre, music, and dance,<sup>4</sup> to date there has been little sustained examination of what different people actually think and feel about the one medium that can truly be said to combine all three.

Much more has been written about the commercial achievements of musicals: especially long-running Broadway and West End extravaganzas like *Cats* and *The Lion King*. An *Economist* article, pleasingly titled 'The Tills are Alive', explains that since its London debut nearly thirty years ago *The Phantom of the Opera* 'has grossed \$5.6 billion worldwide, more than any film or television show' (2013: np); and the Box Office Report from the Society of London Theatre suggests that in 2014 both attendance figures and takings were twice as high for musicals as for 'plays': musicals attracted 8,158,040 people and generated £377,343,916,

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simply aim to point out that within musical theatre studies there is a relative absence of what Freshwater calls the voices of "'ordinary' audience members' with 'no professional stake in the theatre' (2009: 4).

<sup>4</sup> For theatre see e.g. Sauter 2000; Barker 2003; Tulloch 2000, 2005; Reason 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2010a, 2010b; Sedgman 2016; and the two special issues in the journals *About Performance* 10 (2010) and *Participations* 12:1 (2015). For music, see e.g. the chapters in *Coughing & Clapping* (Burland and Pitts 2014) and Benzecry's excellent study of opera fans (2011). For dance, see e.g. Grove, Stevens and McKechnie 2005; Vincs, Schubert and Stevens (2009); Jola, Ehrenberg and Reynolds 2011. And for all three, see e.g. Barker 2012, 2013; Radbourne, Johanson and Glow 2013.

plays 4,425,220 and £149,446,286 respectively (2015: 2). In fact, in his much-quoted 'Toward a Historiography of the Popular', David Savran (2004) infamously suggested that it is musicals' very popularity that has historically led to the dearth of critical attention. As the following section explains, this gap has since partly been addressed by the many examples of excellent work produced over the past decade, not least within the pages of *Studies in Musical Theatre*: a journal which has long worked to position musicals as a form worth taking seriously. However, the pleasures and engagements experienced by distinct audience members are still rarely the subject of focused investigations.

## **Globalized McTheatre vs. Authentic Pleasure**

Rebellato maps the spectacularization of musicals on to a process of commoditisation, a relation which is encapsulated in his term 'the McMusical', defined in the article's sub-header as 'shows that turn the ephemeral event into a soulless repetition'. For Rebellato, such 'mega-musicals' are 'pleasure machines: vast theatrical mechanisms to generate rapture, exhilaration and joy' (2011: np). This is not unique to musicals, as his *Theatre & Globalization* (2009) makes clear: the rise of the international theatrical phenomenon seeks to replace meaningful human connections with visual spectacle as 'part of a transnational entertainment corporation's marketing strategy' (2009: 46). For commentators like Rebellato, the 'vastness' of these productions mean there is something not to be trusted about the kinds of enjoyments they produce. Because these are *manufactured pleasures*, rolled out internationally according to uniform formulae, they are supposedly less authentically 'live' than other forms of theatre.<sup>5</sup> Big performances are those that seek to impress, overwhelm and 'seduce' audiences with their slickness, their razzmatazz, their saccharine ballads and sequined costumes, and Rebellato suggests that '[i]f you go see a musical

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<sup>5</sup> This is historicised by Ethan Mordden in his compelling description of the process by which Broadway became known as the 'pinnacle of American theatre'. Mordden explains how ever-more spectacular productions converged into 'Big Broadway', with its large-scale sets and flamboyant musical numbers; so that from Zeigfield's 1907 *Follies* onwards the entire edifice was characterised by the image of musicals as 'imposing powers [which] combine[d] not just to entertain but to impress the public' (2013: 130).

with a sceptical attitude, these efforts are bound to seem teeth-clenchingly awful' (2011: np). The discerning audiences will naturally sense the assembly line at work: rather like Dorothy pulling back the curtain, to adopt the position of cynic is axiomatically to uncover the artifice behind the magic. If only audiences are able to resist being seduced, they will be 'bound' to see the flaws.<sup>6</sup>

However, current scholarship continues to contest this association between large-scale internationally-circulating commercial theatre and inauthentic or erroneous pleasures. For example, in a recent article Laura MacDonald and Myrte Halman demonstrate how shows like *Wicked!* are actually experientially *glocal*, personalized anew by performers and audiences to fit each new location. Their research into cross-cultural engagement contests the figurations of musical theatre audiences outlined above – as unwittingly taken in, powerless to resist the pull of spectacle – by considering instead the range of fan activities in which invested communities engage. Similarly, Savran has reconceptualised large-scale musicals as 'transnational' productions, able to negotiate cross-cultural identities in and through people's relations with each individual event (2014). Finally, Helen Freshwater (2012) explains how musicals can be experienced both as 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' simultaneously; while fans accept the production's authenticities, they do so with an awareness of the mechanisms by which these authenticities are contrived. Indeed, Freshwater's article demonstrates that musical audiences are able to immerse themselves in performances – to viscerally engage in worlds of drama and song, to be moved by them – while still retaining the distance necessary to engage critically with their construction. Or to put it another way, people are able to see musicals for what they *are* – products made to order by corporations, a 'pleasure machine' churned out night after night – while at the same time appreciating them for what they *do*: to entertain, impress, make audiences smile or weep, get their toes tapping or heart

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<sup>6</sup> In reality, of course, far from trying to pull wool over audiences' eyes, many musicals actually put centre-stage the act of performance itself. Songs like *Chicago's* 'Razzle Dazzle' or *Billy Elliot's* 'Shine' effectively tip the audience a knowing wink, making visible the deception involved in theatrical make-believe (Freshwater 2012: 165), while *Cabaret*, *The Producers*, *A Chorus Line*, *Funny Girl*, and so many more examples are all about showbiz and the impetus to perform.



pounding; and, yes, also to make them think.<sup>7</sup> As MacDonald and Halman argue, paying attention to audiences' engagements presents a necessary challenge to the contention that musicals promote 'international uniformity' rather than social action (2014: 202). Their article robustly addresses the idea that globally-successful commercial productions offer a kind of 'diminished liveness' (204) in contrast with their alternative as Rebellato defines it: namely, the serious or 'cosmopolitan' performance form. Such events are those that 'allegedly transcen[d] the market' (Savran 2004). They are handmade, unrefined: *intimate experiences*, made together in between performer and audience. They are not pre-complete, cannot be manufactured to order, and defy the 'smooth reproducibility' (Rebellato 2011: np) of commercialization.<sup>8</sup>

While my focus here is Harris' one-off Tony performance, rather than the long-running international versions of full-scale musicals studied by researchers such as MacDonald and Halman, this article takes these authors' lead in continuing to contest the conceptual association between repetitive spectacle and lack of 'genuine' connections. This pervading association can be identified especially clearly in the postdramatic preference for untrained bodies over perfection, unplanned elements over rigid choreography, failure over success. For example, The Wooster Group's Ron Vawter suggests that for performers

[i]t's very easy to be bravura and wonderful but if you keep demonstrating and presenting like that it puts the audience in a very passive place psychically. Those gaps are the most important thing because it's there where you stop 'showing' and the audience can use their imaginative powers and they're the ones that fill in that gap (quoted in Etchells 1999: 93).

<sup>7</sup> As Mordden says, 'we expect more from musicals now'. While they must still be absorbing as entertainment, musicals must also give their audience 'something to ponder' (2013: 279).

<sup>8</sup> The idea of intimacy as unmanufacturable has been problematized, particularly within academic analyses of the sex industry. For example, Enck and Preston (1988) use the term 'counterfeit intimacy' to describe how topless waitresses make money by simulating feelings of closeness; while Bernstein (2007) prefers 'bounded intimacy', because of how emotional rapport between sex workers and clients can feel real in the moment, but must then evaporate once the encounter is over. Within theatre studies, too, Freshwater explains how even huge enterprises like *Billy Elliott* are in some respects always newly produced; and Scott McMillin's book *The Musical as Drama* (2014) demonstrates how the pleasures offered to audiences by musicals 'are not a result of smoothly integrated parts, but are rather the rough edges of differences among book, song, dance, design, and orchestra' (MacDonald 2014: 163). Meanwhile, at the other end of the scale, Rachel Gomme argues that participating in one-to-one work brings with it an awareness of underlying economic relations that can actually mitigate against intimacy.

A particularly eloquent case-study of the link between performative caesura and audience engagement comes from Jill Dolan in her description of Deb Margolin's *O Wholly Night and Other Jewish Solecisms*, which on the night Dolan saw it took place during a torrential downpour: 'She strained to project over the noise from the roof, and we strained to hear, and in the process, we were brought even closer, in a performance that's all about intimacy and immediacy. [...] [T]hose of us watching that night were stirred by the intimacy, by Margolin's vulnerability' (2005: 157). Dolan's observation echoes Roland Barthes' argument that the audience is made active by witnessing ineptitude. Using the example of the striptease, Barthes suggests that amateurism restores to the experience its erotic power, with 'gauche' dancing and "'technical" awkwardness' lending the act 'an unexpected importance, denying the woman the alibi of art and the refuge of being an object, imprisoning her in a condition of weakness and timorousness' (2009: 86). By this rationale it is only through vulnerability, weakness and imperfection that the performer can be seen as a subject: not a 'haughty' or 'remote' figure, skilful and icily indifferent, but a real person with whom the audience will be able to identify and connect.

The dominant understanding is therefore that intimacy and spectacle are dichotomously opposed. In writing about Diderot, J. S. Siegel described two opposing means for producing lasting impact: the first an aesthetic of *grandeur* – 'a principle of force, based on the sheer size and power of the impression' – and the second an aesthetic of *intimacy*, 'a principle of attraction: it demands a closeness of association between subject and audience, and necessitates identification and involvement' (1963: 248). As the above suggests, nearly half a century since Siegel set up such oppositions, there remains a lingering sense that the two are mutually exclusive. However, as I will establish here, it was in fact the very bigness of the 'Bigger!' number, along with the 'bravura' and 'wonderful' display provided by Neil Patrick Harris, that led many online commentators to feel a strong sense of connection with his performance.

## **Emoticons, applause, and infinite jaw drops: Investigating online comments**

This article analyses the online comments submitted in response to a YouTube video of 'Bigger!' posted on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2013 (the day after the live broadcast) by user 'phillyjugglers'.<sup>9</sup> This particular video has received more than 6.6 million views and been shared 11.7 thousand times. Figure 1 below shows the activity on this video by daily views:

<FIGURE 1>

**Figure 1:** *Daily views of video as of April 2015. Graph adapted from YouTube data (phillyjuggler 2013)*

This method allowed me to gain a rough idea of when any changes in activity took place. For any obvious spike I added notes to the graph to indicate my guess as to what prompted each. Curiously, no notable spike can be seen in late August 2014 when the 2013 Tony Awards were featured in the 2014 Emmys.

Two brief ethical and methodological notes here. First, while research into online audiences tends to assume that comments posted in the public domain are intended to be read by an unrestricted audience and can therefore be sourced as research material without seeking further approval, this article follows authors such as Bore 2011, Williams 2011 and Boyle 2014 in applying a kind of 'light disguise' (Bruckman 2002), with comments quoted without dates or usernames. Second, I am aware that to study online responses is to analyse a specific kind of text. As Mike Thelwall (2014) makes clear, while researching YouTube comments can be a useful way of taking the temperature of public opinion, this method only really makes visible a sense of how people respond to events online and not how they might react in the wider world. I have therefore been unable to investigate the reactions of people who watched the performance on television at the time of broadcast, with the exception of the few who talked about doing so as part of their YouTube commentary. With the ratio of comments to views currently standing at around 2,200:1, I have also not been able to gather

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<sup>9</sup> Another iteration of the video exists on YouTube, shared by user 'GuilbeauxFan', but this has only gathered around 300,000 views to date. There appears to be no video of this performance available on the official YouTube channel of The Tony Awards, probably because the entire broadcast is available to buy on the US iTunes store (iTunes 2013).

information on the quiet majority, who watched without posting a response. But this is actually part of what interests me. What might it mean to spontaneously comment – in this very public manner – on an online video of a live performance?

On 10 February 2015 I used a piece of open-source software called Webometric Analyst<sup>10</sup> to download comments left on the ‘phillyjuggler’ video. This data was imported into Excel for analysis. At that time the video contained around 3000 comments and replies. Webometric Analyst only captures comments and not replies, so the analysis below is based on a scrape of 1988 comments. A quantitative assessment of the geographic location of commentators can be viewed in Figure 2 below:

<FIGURE 2>

**Figure 2:** *Geographic location of commentators as of 10<sup>th</sup> February 2015.*

Comments were posted from 102 countries, ranging from Antarctica to Yemen. The majority of locations gathered a handful of comments (collected above under ‘Other’), so for reasons of clarity only countries with more than twenty comments have been included on the graph.<sup>11</sup>

Overall responses to Harris’ performance were overwhelmingly positive, with the video gathering more than 50,000 likes and just 500 dislikes (a ratio of 100:1). Indeed, qualitative analysis found that comments were almost invariably

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<sup>10</sup> Webometric Analyst was created by Mike Thelwall. By downloading the software and entering the web addresses of specific YouTube videos, researchers can ‘scrape’ each individual comment from the internet on to a CSV file, along with limited data on the commenter taken from their YouTube profile. This software and the steps for using it are described at length in Thelwall’s extremely helpful chapter ‘Analysing YouTube Audience Reactions and Discussions’ (2014).

<sup>11</sup> By far the highest response rate came from the United States, which contributed forty per cent of all comments (762). The UK, Canada and Germany came next, contributing 184, 112 and 96 respectively; followed by a sharp drop, with the next most frequent, Australia, contributing 53 comments. The numbers then tail off gently over the next eight countries, concluding with Poland at 21. Almost twenty per cent (390) came from the 88 countries missed off the graph, which contributed a mean average of 4.4 each.

characterised by intense articulations of pleasure, no matter from where in the world the author was posting:<sup>12</sup>

That Guy is awesomeeeeeeee no word no feeling can exactly describe what he is really doing .great Neil ! God job !! [Denmark]

a trully funny funny and legendary show!!! congrats neil,congrats!!! from spain!!!

God ! Do I ever love this vid ! [Canada]

Commenters frequently remarked on the scale of the performance, citing its 'epic' and 'grand'<sup>13</sup> qualities as a key reason for enjoyment:

Juste .... ENORME !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! waow !!!!!!!!!!!!! \0/

I'm a year late at watching this but damn, i can FEEL its grandness. NPH you legen-fkn-dary human you. I just love you.

THIS. WAS. HUGE!!!

Bigger? I think you meant fuckin' GIGANTIC! I am not missing the Tony's next year!!! This show is getting good!

In fact, a number of people felt that with this performance a ceiling of enormity had been reached, the likes of which could never be surpassed:

That can never ever be topped!!

There has never been such a grand opening number before this or since...

There will never be a better opening act in anything...might as well cancel any future opening acts o\_o

There were signs that the performance's largeness had operated on two connected planes. While the comments above demonstrate that the

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<sup>12</sup> All YouTube comments in this article have been taken from responses posted on the single video referenced here (phillyjuggler 2013), with dates and usernames removed for the purposes of light disguise. In this article I have elected to present comments exactly as they appear online. As these have been posted in the public domain I have assumed that the poster is happy for their voice to be distributed freely in this way, and that it is not up to me as a researcher to alter these texts.

<sup>13</sup> The word 'legendary', while also a marker of scale, was used slightly differently: as a reference to the catchphrase of Barney Stinson, Harris' character in the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother*. This was an allusion Harris himself made during the performance, giving a little wink to camera as he sang: 'I guarantee a truly legendary show'.

performance's value for many people lay in the size of its construction, it was also seen as a big performance because of the magnitude of *what it did to them*: producing huge emotional and physical responses. Freshwater explains how in *Billy Elliott* fan forums '[n]o description is complete without a paragraph in which fans signal the emotional authenticity of their experience' by commenting on their own 'bodily reactions' (2012: 163). A similar desire to share visceral impact comes through here: from finishing the video feeling 'stupefied' to saying it 'took my breath away', it seems that the act of watching is often a very physical experience:

Infinite jaw drops during this performance! :o

\* looks up \*  
\* takes off glasses \*  
\* tear falls \*  
"FABULOUS"

You literally CAN'T dislike this. It's practically impossible to do anything but smile after watching this :D

HOOLLYYYYY MOTHAAAA I HAVE TEARS IN MY EYES AND MY GOOSEBUMPS ARE OUT OF CONTROL THIS IS CRAZY GOOD.

So much so, in fact, that a number of people indicated that the performance had been almost too big to come to terms with, to speak about, to fully take in. It was almost too much to handle:

I will NEVER... EVER... get over this! Neil Patrick Harris you are golden!  
<3 ;)

if i was in the audience i would have been like "omg ... wait what... wait. NO WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON? HOW DID HE DO THAT? WHERE THE FUCK ARE ALL THESE PEOPLE COMING FROM?! HOW....WAIT... okay i am just fucking conna clap"

Wow..... Gobsmacked!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Commenting, 'liking', and sharing videos on social media can be understood as a means of publicly expressing appreciation. A number of people used the act of leaving a message to thank Harris personally ('NPH I adore you'; 'Neil Patrick you Beautiful Beautiful Man!'; 'incredible neil incredible. so much power.brilliant'). Like the fan-mail letters sent to Punchdrunk described by Rose

Biggin (2015) these comments function as a virtual curtain-call, allowing audiences to acknowledge performers' efforts in a way that watching a digitally removed version can otherwise frustrate:

Was I the only one who gave this a standing ovation and didn't feel at all silly that it was for a video on YouTube?

God!! Is there any way I can "like" the video again..like a 1000 more times??

I clapped at the end then I realised I wasn't there XD

From all this emerges a palpable sense that the act of watching is too big to be silently contained within the bounds of the individual. Indeed, a necessary part of researching dispersed audiences is studying how experiences overspill their borders, with digital technology increasingly 'allow[ing] fans to make connections with a global community of fellow enthusiasts' (Freshwater 2012: 163). Lucy Bennett (2013) demonstrates how Tori Amos fans feel an obligation to tweet concert set-lists in the moment, so that people not in attendance can play those songs contemporaneously and capture a feeling of the live. Martin Barker's (2012, 2013) work on Alternative Content – performances live-streamed to cinemas – found that 'liveness' operates on a number of levels, from co-presence to temporal simultaneity to an awareness of being together with other audiences. In this case, the outpouring of pleasure for 'Bigger!' can be understood as a way of sharing and therefore extending delight ('This whole number is a joy. Joy from beginning to end. Sure, a lot of hard work went into it. But it sure is a pleasure'). Furthermore, it is also a way of solidifying that sense of having *taken part in something*. As Karen Burland and Stephanie Pitts explain, coughing and clapping during live performances can enable audiences to insert a sense of their own physical presence into the concert-hall (2013: 2). Similarly, online actions like writing physical descriptions, using emoticons – such as :o (mouth open), :D (huge grin), \o/ (arms in air), O.O (wide eyes), :' (teary smile) – and choosing a filmed audience member to act as an emotional proxy ('6:35 - 6:36 <- My reaction exactly') can be a way of projecting one's virtual presence into the heart of a communal event. While the performance might not be received as physically or temporally live, there is nonetheless a sense of 'social'

liveness: of sharing a (digital) space with other people. In this respect, the experience has yet to end. It is still unfolding – with comments continuing to be added every day – and the experience can be tapped back into whenever the audience member likes:

I have watched this about a million times and I still get chills every time.

whenever i feel down, all i need is this video

I'm pretty sure I've watched this a billion times, and every single time I am amazed, this is the best opening number I have ever seen !

Harris' brilliance was a frequent source of astonishment, with a quarter of all comments naming 'Neil' or 'NPH' specifically. His performance was generally considered to be slick, professional, and technically impressive, with many people articulating wonder at Harris' mastery of complex actions, as well as his ability to perform feats of endurance without making visible the strain:

genuinely impressed at how he managed to sing, play the guitar, dance, act, rap, hoop jump, and perform magic without sounding out of breath. amazing guy!

Also super strong – after all that running, dancing and climbing he holds himself out from the Tony award for like a minute.

Also, when he pops through the center of that little hoop feet first. Holy shit.

A common theme was to position Harris as 'superhuman', a 'perfect' performer, the 'best entertainer ever' ('just Ridonculous ! Thermo nuclear !!!'), summed up in this short comment: 'IS HE EVEN HUMAN?!'. It's therefore fair to say that the majority of commenters would probably characterise Harris' performance as 'bravura and wonderful', to use Ron Vawter's words: or, to borrow an alternative term from Eugenio Barba, as *virtuosic*. In a similar vein to Vawter, Barba sees virtuosic performances as encouraging passivity because of how they make the performer's body appear 'inaccessible', 'other', using techniques 'so different from daily techniques that they seem to have no connection with them'. In such performances 'there is no longer a dialectic relationship but only distance' (2003: 16). As with Barthes' striptease artists, virtuosity by this definition apparently mitigates the possibility of intimacy entirely.



Echoing cast-members' impressed exhortations to go, Neil, go!, audiences themselves often signalled awareness of their own distance from Harris' abilities ('I would have been out of breath within the first 20 seconds of that performance. Incredible.'). However, there were signs that for many people this was still experienced as an intimate encounter *because of* its magnitude: the feeling that live performance was being pushed to new limits. This was reflected in an interview with Lin-Manuel Miranda:

As for Harris – last night was the fourth time he's hosted the Tonys – he was not only game for anything. He kept wanting to up the ante. "Neil's like, how about I do a magic trick? How about I jump through a hoop? Can that rhyme be more complicated? I mean he just embraces a degree of difficulty that I've never seen. It's a joy to write for him," Miranda said. "It's crazy to write for someone who can do everything."

(Chai 2013: np)

As the comments quoted in this article show, Harris' 'perfect', practically-otherworldly performance did not enervate its fans. Quite the contrary: they found themselves tremendously (often physically) affected by it, moved to stand up in their living rooms, to applaud, to laugh, to cry, to take a bow themselves; and then to write a comment. Rather than making people passive, producing distance between performers and spectators, big productions can actually provoke the feeling that performers are giving their all, and that in doing so they are *giving the audience something of themselves*. Nothing is held back.

I still watch this for inspiration. It get's me enthused to go through another day. The fact that the audience is all aghast gets me every time. It was Neil at his best.

I can tell you that very few, in fact a handful, gets a standing ovation like Neil did with this one. All in this video were stella but Neil takes it to a different level. I can't get tired watching. Thanks for making the evening a truly legendary one!

This is an orgy of talent. From the writers/composers (Lin-Manuel Miranda and Tom Kitt) who deserve a crazy amount of credit for that number, to NPH and every dancer, actor, performer that had a part in these breathtaking 8 minutes. I'm seriously in awe of that opening, even after the nth time I watched it.

It is useful here to return to one-to-one performances; not because musicals are necessarily compared directly to immersive works specifically, but because of the particularly strong assumptions made about participatory art, which often claims the ability to offer individual spectators a meeting with ‘real people’ during which performers may ‘reveal something about themselves and connect in some form of meaningful exchange’ (Chatzichristodoulou and Zerihan 2012: 1). There is often the sense that, in doing so, these and other consciously intimate theatre forms can provide an antidote to the inauthentic relations and commercial interests of media-and-spectacle-saturated modern life: a form of resistance that Rebellato calls ‘cosmopolitan’ (2009: 4). However, as Rachel Gomme points out, these encounters are also embedded in transactional relationships and so often contain an awareness of limits on both sides, with the ‘precise script offer[ing] containment: the performer [...] will know what he can offer in the form of self-disclosure or openness to the other’ (2015). Meanwhile, big productions are frequently experienced in terms of excess. Spilling beyond their borders, they are those that cannot be contained, that push past the limits of performers’ abilities, and even of the screen itself. This can, I argue, be experienced as a kind of intimacy.

As MacDonald and Halman suggest, a musical like *Wicked* can be seen ‘to be playing the role that Rebellato envisions theatre playing in cosmopolitanism, whereby audiences’ “identification with characters on stage – often kinds of people that we would not ordinarily encounter – perhaps prepares the way for such identifications outside the theatre” (2014: 213). Following this advice, instead of being the natural result of personalised production processes – of incorporating smallness, vulnerability, the face-to-face encounter into an event – I contend that ‘authentically’ intimate encounters are a process of reception. Or to put it differently, although further empirical research into audiences outside online contexts is undoubtedly necessary, what I have demonstrated here is how markers of intimacy come not from the way an event is *generated*, but from how it is *experienced*.

## **Conclusion: Parasociality as handmade encounters**

This article does not mean to reverse the ‘smallness = intimacy’ equation by suggesting that bigger will always be better. Nor do I overlook the relational aspect of other, smaller forms of theatre: the idea that intimacy is something that ‘should be felt on both sides – a passage of affect shared between two beings’ (Gomme 2015). While in some ways the commenters quoted above can be seen to reach out to Harris personally, they obviously do so with the awareness that they are not in his presence, and that probably he will never read their thanks. However, there is something revealing in audiences’ desire to send descriptions of affect out into the world. By exploring online reactions, this article has established how big, bold, bravura performances can in some ways be experienced as intimate not despite, but because, of their size.

In this exploration, I align myself with other authors who have begun to do similar kinds of work. For example, within theatre studies Nicholas Ridout explains how it is possible to feel as if a performer is speaking directly to you even when in a crowd of people, with the one-to-many relationship permitting spectators ‘to enjoy the feeling of intimacy that comes from witnessing acts of self-revelation in others, without disclosing anything of herself, safe in the darkness of her seat’ (2006: 77).<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, as Rachel Gomme describes, encountering a performer alone at close quarters can sometimes sharpen the awareness that something is being held back. And within the field of mass media, Donald Horton and Richard Wohl also show how technological mediation does not necessarily mitigate against intimacy, arguing that radio, television and cinema often work to ‘give the illusion of [a] face-to-face relationship’ through the figure of the ‘persona’:

To say that he is familiar and intimate is to use pale and feeble language for the pervasiveness and closeness with which multitudes feel his presence. The spectacular fact about such personae is that they can claim and achieve an intimacy with what are literally crowds of

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<sup>14</sup> Within the Tony performance, inclusions such as the disappearing act can potentially be seen as self-revelatory references to Neil Patrick Harris’ persona, whose own love of magic has been well documented.

strangers, and this intimacy, even if it is an imitation and a shadow of what is ordinarily meant by that word, is extremely influential with, and satisfying for, the great numbers who willingly receive it and share in it.  
(2006: np)

Horton and Wohl call this a 'para-social' relationship because, while the interaction is generally one-sided and controlled by the performer, it nonetheless contains the capacity to offer audiences very strong feelings of fellowship with an on-screen presence.<sup>15</sup> A similar impulse to forge connections with personae can be seen in audiences' relationships with musical theatre performers, as evidenced by Freshwater's (2012) and MacDonald and Halman's (2014) respective descriptions of how people 'collect' encounters with different actors of a role, or Wolf's (2007) discussion of fans' close interest in *Wicked* divas. While this is too complex an idea to fully dissect here, it is worth considering how frequently, in audiences' discussions of Neil Patrick Harris, the para-social aspects of the relationship come into focus.

Here I must point to the commercial forces at work. After all, 'Big Broadway' is big business, profiting hugely from the production of intimate connections. It is therefore tempting to propose that audiences who succumb to such sensations have in some way been taken in. However, I am suspicious of suggestions that popular cultural forms present an 'illusion' of intimacy, just an 'imitation and a shadow' of the genuine article, while 'sacralist modernist' theatrical forms offer something closer to the real thing (Savran 2004). As Maurice Kwok-to Choi and Kwok-bun Chan ask in their book exploring the connection between love, sex, intimacy and money (2013), *if manufactured intimacies are experienced as genuine in the moment, why should we consider them counterfeit?* Following this, I propose that the feelings of intimacy provoked by even the tiniest performance are not necessarily any more authentic than that produced by big performances. Although new participatory forms do offer possibilities for in-the-moment reciprocity, the resulting intimacy is similarly bounded, limited to the moment of encounter, and managed within an experience economy.

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<sup>15</sup> Barker's research (2012, 2013) also shows how digitally-streamed events can surprise audiences by offering feelings of intimacy (generated through close-ups and interviews) with performers who may be thousands of miles away.

Rather than seeing musical theatre as a 'pleasure machine', churning out joy for the masses, we might therefore ask how *every* theatrical encounter can be considered a custom-built experience. This approach better enables us to study how theatrical pleasure is handmade every time, as audiences craft it for themselves.

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